

Slavery and the American West: the Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War

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Book Reviews

Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War, by Michael A. Morrison. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xiv, 396 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, \$49.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOEL H. SILBEY, CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Historians remain divided over the relative importance of the different issues and conditions that brought on the American Civil War. Recently, as Michael Morrison suggests in this strongly argued book, there has been more concentration both on the implacable influence of distinct and deeply antagonistic sectional cultures and, paradoxically, on the importance of nonsectional issues, political structure, and the way people voted than on the great divisive issues that once were considered the centerpiece of the causation argument. In defining the issues that led inexorably to civil war, some have stressed the existence of two distinct cultures, rooted in economic and political differences. Others have emphasized a range of ethnic and religious conflicts as the prime factors in shaping the party system and causing its demise in the 1850s (the so-called Iowa School of political history, for its roots among those teaching and studying at the University of Iowa in the 1950s and 1960s). Morrison is not satisfied with either of these arguments.

He thus sees his work as correcting and revising existing historiography. He wishes to bring the issue of territorial expansion and its effects back to the center of events from where it had been dislodged in recent years. In doing so, he offers a fresh recounting of the battles over the admission of Texas, the Mexican Cession, and the territorial organization of Kansas and Nebraska. He emphasizes, with great clarity and profundity, the basic intellectual commitments of the political actors of the day, the ideas that drove their behavior as they grappled with an issue that many believed defined the nation and its future. Political debates occurred within certain ideological boundaries. Originally, Morrison argues, these debates were not sectional, but partisan, deriving from the heritage that went back to the Revolution, emphasizing issues of individual liberty and its protection against its many present enemies. In the first half of the century these

arguments separated Democrats from Whigs. In particular, territorial expansion "helped define the parties" (132). Democrats believed that such expansion preserved and extended liberty. Whigs, on the other hand, were less friendly to territorial growth, seeing the future of the nation's liberties threatened by too much land grabbing and better served by consolidating the land the nation already possessed.

As the territorial issue appeared again and again and grew in intensity, however, its character in the national debate, Morrison suggests, changed profoundly. With each new appearance, the issue moved away from its original partisan roots and took on an increasingly sectional flavor instead. The nature of the discourse changed even as similar terms of debate continued to be used. A transformation of political consciousness was under way, one that arrayed the sections against one another. According to this discourse, both sections were now trying to subvert the Union while destroying the other's liberties. As a result, the old national party system fragmented and gave way, beginning in the mid-1840s.

Morrison's narrative is written with sophistication and flair even as it contains many familiar aspects. He has done an impressive amount of research in the surviving manuscripts and archival material from the period. *Slavery and the American West* has all of the good qualities of a single-minded attention to an important theme present in pre-Civil War politics: density, thoroughness, a subtle awareness of shadings of opinion, a powerfully amassed case on behalf of a point of view. He has gathered an enormous number of pithy quotations and used them with insight and intelligence to effectively bring the battle over the territories back to the center of the process of the sectionalizing of American politics and, ultimately, disunion.

Single-mindedness reveals a great deal, and the sheer power of Morrison's argument will convince many. There are alternative perspectives about these events, however. There remains more to say about the timing of the change toward sectional political dominance, and the way the party system broke down, allowing for the subsequent surge of sectional power in American politics. Morrison does not ignore alternative perspectives, but he is persuaded that they are not as critical to understanding the era as some of us have believed, so he does not fit them into the story as readily as he might (and should).

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